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STATE HEALTH DIRECTOR WARNS PUBLIC ABOUT EATING RAW SPROUTS

SACRAMENTO - Citing recurring outbreaks of illnesses associated with the consumption of contaminated raw alfalfa and clover sprouts and an advisory from the federal Food and Drug Administration (FDA) on the potential risks associated with consuming these sprouts, State Health Director Diana Bontá today urged consumers to do the following:

- Children, the elderly and individuals with weakened immune systems should not eat raw alfalfa and clover sprouts.
- Healthy individuals could become ill from eating raw alfalfa or clover sprouts. Those who wish to avoid the risk of illness should not eat these products.

Raw alfalfa and clover sprouts have emerged as recognized sources of foodborne illness in the United States. Since 1996, at least 12 sprout-associated outbreaks in California and numerous sprout-associated outbreaks in other states have been reported. Although the outbreaks have included healthy individuals of both sexes and all ages, public health officials are particularly concerned about children, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems. Since these individuals are at greatest risk of developing serious complications if they become ill, they should not eat raw sprouts. Bontá reiterated previous advisories from the California Department of Health Services in emphasizing that alfalfa and clover sprouts should not be served in nursing homes, hospitals and daycare centers.

Salmonella or Escherichia coli (E. coli) O157:H7 infections are the most common illnesses associated with sprout consumption. For most healthy adults, these bacteria cause four to seven days of diarrhea, fever and abdominal cramps. Although these infections are generally self-limiting in healthy adults, in some individuals, especially young children, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems, the illness may be much more severe. The bacteria may spread to the blood stream and to other vital organs, and even be life threatening. In some children, E. coli O157:H7 infection causes hemolytic uremic syndrome, a serious illness that can result in kidney failure, anemia and death.

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Raw sprouts present unique food safety problems because:

- The warm humid conditions needed to grow sprouts are also ideal for the rapid growth of harmful bacteria.
- Sprouts are generally eaten raw with no additional treatment, such as cooking, which would eliminate harmful bacteria.
- Washing may reduce the bacterial load. However, it does not eliminate the harmful bacteria that may be present.
- People may unknowingly eat sprouts in sandwiches and salads purchased at restaurants and delicatessens.

Bontá advised consumers who wish to reduce their risk of foodborne illness to specifically request that raw alfalfa or clover sprouts not be added to their food purchased at restaurants, delicatessens and other eating establishments. Sprouts grown in the home also present a risk if eaten raw. Bontá also reminded consumers that harmful bacteria contamination may not change the appearance, texture or taste of any food product.

FDA has issued a similar consumer advisory regarding the potential risks associated with eating alfalfa and clover sprouts. FDA has also issued a guidance document for the sprout industry on recommended sprout production practices designed to reduce the risk of bacterial contamination. Additional measures to reduce the risk of illness associated with sprouts are being investigated by industry and government, including irradiation of sprout seeds.

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